NAXOS
A Guided Tour of
Nationalism in the
Romantic Era
Volume 4

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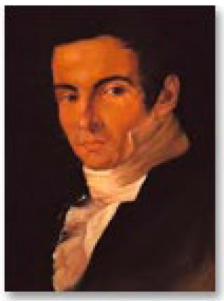
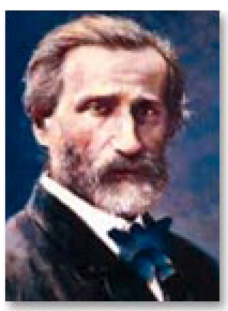


BELLINI, VINCENZO (1801–1835)

Vincenzo Bellini was born in Catania in 1801, the son and grandson of musicians, taught first by his father and then by his grandfather. Initially he wrote a quantity of church music, later adding secular arias and ariettas for the entertainment of local notables. In 1819 he entered Naples Conservatory and, on the completion of his studies, was able to offer a public performance of his opera *Adelson e Salvini*. The opera's good reception led to a commission from the Teatro San Carlo. Bellini's third opera, *Il pirata*, staged at La Scala in 1827, was the true foundation of his success. Other operas for Milan followed, and by August 1833 Bellini was in Paris, where he enjoyed the friendship of Rossini, mixing in a social circle that included Chopin (1810–1849) and the poet Heinrich Heine (1797–1856). For Paris he wrote *I puritani*, which had its first performance at the Théâtre-Italien in January 1835. The world seemed to promise much, with appointment as a Chevalier of the Legion d'honneur and the possibility of further commissions for the Paris Opera. In late August, however, he fell ill, and died on 23 September, his death mourned with a Requiem at Les Invalides.

OPERA (Tracks 1-4)
Bellini's first great success was in 1827 when Il pirata was staged at La Scala, Milan. The six further operas that he wrote include a version of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* called *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*, the famous and complicated *La sonnambula* produced in Milan in 1831, the demanding opera *Norma* set in Roman Gaul and staged at La Scala at the end of the same year, and his final work *I puritani*, which was mounted in Paris in 1835.

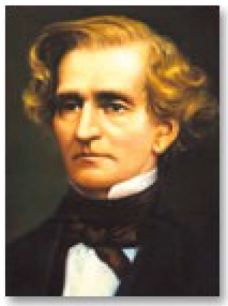


VERDI, GIUSEPPE (1813–1901)

Giuseppe Verdi's career spans three quarters of the nineteenth century. He was born in 1813 at Roncole, near Busseto, the son of a tavern-keeper, and distinguished himself locally in music. The encouragement and patronage of his future father-in-law, Antonio Barezzi, allowed him further study in Milan, before he returned to Busseto as maestro di musica. His first venture into opera was with *Oberto*, in 1839, and it was reasonably successful, but was followed by the failure of *Un giorno di regno*. His early reputation was established by the opera *Nabucco*, staged at La Scala in Milan in 1842. Verdi's subsequent career in Italy was to bring him unrivalled fame, augmented by his reputation as a patriot and a fervent supporter of Italian national unity. His association with the singer Giuseppina Strepponi led to their marriage in 1859, the year of his opera *Un ballo in maschera*. He completed his last opera, *Falstaff*, in 1893, four years before her death, but felt himself unequal to further Shakespearian operas that were then proposed. He died while staying in Milan, early in 1901, his death the subject of mourning throughout Italy.

OPERA (Tracks 5-12)
Verdi's name is synonymous with nineteenth-century Italian opera, and his melodic gifts and sensitive orchestration were unsurpassed. The best-known of his 28 operas are R*igoletto, La traviata, Macbeth, Simon Boccanegra, Aida, Otello* and *Falstaff,* though there are several others that have retained a firm place in the repertory.

CHURCH MUSIC (Tracks 13-14)
In addition to settings of the *Te Deum* and the *Stabat mater*, Verdi wrote an impressive large-scale setting of the Requiem, its origin stemming from the death of Rossini in 1868. It is a work of operatic magnificence, none the less moving for its theatrical elements.



BERLIOZ, HECTOR (1803–1869)

Berlioz was born near Grenoble in 1803, and his father, a doctor, was very keen for the boy to follow in his footsteps. At the age of seventeen Berlioz moved to Paris to embark half-heartedly on his medical studies but was soon offered a place at the Paris Conservatoire. His father reluctantly agreed to let him change direction, registering his disapproval by reducing his allowance by a considerable amount. Paris was a major European centre of opera, and many of Berlioz's musical innovations derive from the operatic tradition. He also loved the theatre, and on 11 September 1827 he attended a performance of *Hamlet* which changed his life. The role of Ophelia was played by a young Irish actress called Harriet Smithson, with whom Berlioz immediately became obsessed. His infatuation led in 1830 to the composition of the wildly imaginative *Symphonie fantastique*. After she attended a performance of the *Symphonie fantastique* and realised that she was the subject of this astounding work, Smithson agreed to meet Berlioz: the pair married in 1833, but the couple separated ten years later. Throughout his life, Berlioz toured extensively all over Europe, conducting performances of his own and other composers' music, despite suffering from a debilitating and painful intestinal condition from 1848 until his death in 1869.

OPERA (Track 15)
Berlioz wrote four complete operas, the most famous of which is *Les Troyens* ('The Trojans'), later divided into two parts: *The Capture of Troy* and *The Trojans*. He also wrote an opera based on the life of Benvenuto Cellini.

ORCHESTRAL MUSIC (Tracks 16-21)
The *Symphonie fantastique* of 1830, an orchestral work that contains autobiographical elements, suggested new paths in composition, and was considered especially adventurous in terms of orchestration. It was followed four years later by *Harold in Italy* for viola and orchestra, written for (but never performed by) the great violinist Paganini. Concert overtures include a Shakespearean *King Lear* and two overtures based on the work of Sir Walter Scott, *Waverley and Rob Roy.*

VOCAL MUSIC (Tracks 22-36)
In competing for the important Prix de Rome, Berlioz wrote four cantatas in successive years. *Les Nuits d'été* ('Summer Nights') comprises settings of poems by Théophile Gautier for solo voice and orchestra. Other important works by Berlioz include *Eight Scenes from Faust,* later revised as *The Damnation of Faust,* the Christmas oratorio *L'Enfance du Christ* ('The Childhood of Christ') and the extravagantly orchestrated *Grande Messe des morts.*

CHOPIN, FRYDERYK (1810–1849)

Chopin was a brilliant virtuoso composer-pianist who moved away from his native Eastern Europe to the bright lights of Paris. He was born in Warsaw where his French father was a schoolmaster of modest means. By the age of eight, Chopin's precocious composing and piano-playing skills had made him into a local celebrity, but as he got older he felt that Warsaw was too restrictive and provincial. In his late teens he made a concert trip to Vienna, where he did not go down as well as he had hoped. When Russia invaded and conquered Poland in 1831, Chopin made the decision to move to Paris. Chopin's first months in France were difficult financially, but before long he had made friends with influential musicians such as Liszt, Rossini and Berlioz, and had built up a good list of aristocratic piano pupils which provided him with a good income for most of his life. After he had been in Paris for five years, he met and fell in love with the famous female writer George Sand, though this did not last. After travelling to London and Scotland he fell ill, eventually dying in Paris in 1849.

PIANO MUSIC (Tracks 37-57)

Chopin created or developed a number of new forms of piano music, vehicles for his own poetic use of the instrument. He used the popular form of the waltz in a score of such compositions, as well as the polonaise and mazurka, Polish dances. The four ballades are evocative narrative works, while the 21 nocturnes continue an evocative form initiated by the Irish pianist John Field. He also wrote 26 preludes, 27 studies, four Scherzos, three Sonatas, a Berceuse, a Barcarolle, four Impromptus and a number of other works. He also wrote two piano concertos.